

The Buddhas Porana Dipankara and Porana Gotama

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The Image-House or Paṭimāghara of Mahanedrarama in Penang presents a somewhat new concept in Buddhist iconography. The story of the Buddha Gotama as Bodhisatta or Buddha aspirant while he was still the ascetic Sumedha, getting for himself the solemn declaration from the Buddha Dīpaṅkara that he would one day, in time to come, would become a Buddha, forms the major theme depicted there. The Bodhisatta is presented in the presence of all the Buddhas of the past, one after another, starting with Buddha Dipankara and ending with Buddha Kassapa as receiving the *niyata vivaraṇa* or **solemn assurance** that he would be a Fully Enlightened One at some time in the future.

Besides this solemn conclave of the Buddhas of the past, with the Bodhisatta sitting in a respectful kneeling position at their feet and getting this declaration, the image house also contains, stretching along the entire length of one side, the equally impressive and emotion-stirring statue of Buddha Gotama in his death-bed or Parinirvāṇa. Among the many portrayals of the Buddha in statuary, the one in Parinirvāṇa is meant to be, in terms of religious significance, a very instructive one. It is intended to rouse in the minds of the worshippers the very significant fact of impermanence or *anitya*, **that all conditioned things are liable to perish**. In fact, this is what the Buddha instructed his disciples about, lying in his death-bed in Kusinārā, as his last advice to them - *vayadhammā sarīkhārā*. Therefore hasten to accomplish your mission - *Appamādena sampādettha*.

The unique thing about the Mahendrārāma image-house is that at the two ends of the statue of the Buddha Gotama in Parinirvāṇa are two standing Buddha statues. The one at the head end is named **Porāṇa Gotama** and the other at the feet end **Porāṇa Dīpaṅkara**. Literary sources we know do not seem to provide an explanation to this presentation. But we feel that it is a

commendably advanced point of observation.

The presentation of the Buddhas of the past, with the aspiring Gotama Bodhisatta to become a Buddha one day, presets with vigour and vitality the aspiration to Buddhahood, with the accompanying theory of the Pāramitā or Gradual Perfection. But once the mission is accomplished, **what had to be done has been done - *katam karaṇīyaṃ***. There is **no more of a future beyond this - *Nāparam itthattāyā ti pajānāti***. In this sense we would feel happy calling both Buddha Dīpaṅkara who pronounced the future Buddhahood of Buddha Gotama and Buddha Gotama himself who finally achieved it **as things of the past**, namely **Porāṇa Dīpaṅkara and Porāṇa Gotama**.

Reflect here on the Parable of the Raft given by the Buddha in the Alagaddupama Sutta - *Kullūpamaṃ vo bhikkhave dhammaṃ desissāmi nittharaṇatthāya no gahaṇatthāya*. The Buddha wanted you to use the Dhamma itself only as a means to cross over from Saṃsāra to Nirvāraṇa. There is no more need to carry it on your shoulder after you have crossed over. Apparently, so is the concept of the Buddha.